

Preface

This volume represents the fourth and final cornerstone of a four-volume series of comparative research analysing education as a lifelong process – the *eduLIFE* Lifelong Learning series. We call it the cornerstone because it extends the scope of three previously published volumes on adult learning, school-to-work transitions, and differentiation in secondary education to also encompass the conditions and causes of educational inequality in the initial phase of the life course: early childhood.

The book tackles mechanisms that differentiate children's experience in their early years of life with consequences for subsequent educational careers and life chances. Adopting an interdisciplinary approach, we trace the origins of later educational inequality by studying how far skill acquisition and learning outcomes already start to diverge between children from various social backgrounds in the very first few years of life. We also look at the potential of institutions of early education and care to reduce social inequality in educational opportunities and attainment.

Although this book is clearly centred on how inequalities are created through different forms of childcare and early education, we also acknowledge the essential role of early education and care for the whole of society. Institutions of childcare and education may promote the well-being of children and their rights as well as their emotional and intellectual development. Moreover, their value goes beyond the provision of well-being and equal opportunities for children; they also represent a basis for equal opportunities for men and women, a way of increasing female employment, and a support for the well-being of parents. Cross-national assessments taking into account variations in preschool and childcare settings in contemporary societies are very rare, and our book makes an important contribution to filling this gap.

The 12 country chapters in our volume cover a variety of national contexts and provide insight into a broad range of different early education and care policies. We show how the costs, availability, and quality of early childhood education vary across countries. Moreover, we discuss how far and in what ways institutional contexts may affect the distribution of opportunities among young children from different social backgrounds. The volume provides evidence that initial disadvantage may, to some

extent, be offset by adequate policies, and it highlights the successful examples of good quality early education. However, the volume also suggests that one should not be too over-optimistic about the outcomes of such policies, because some kinds of inequalities are deeply rooted in families' resources and behaviours. Hence, they can hardly be eliminated in full, even though they can be reduced.

We thank all the contributors who supported us in this endeavour. It has been a wonderful experience to collaborate with leading experts on the topic coming from various disciplines. We have gained knowledge about the ways in which many facets of childcare relate to social inequality, but we have also learned that interdisciplinarity is a useful and often underused tool for gaining a better understanding of the phenomena that surround us. We are grateful to the *eduLIFE* internal team that formed the basis for this project, and whose dedication in all its stages was indispensable for the preparation of the volume. We thank Fabrizio Bernardi and Ingrid Schoon for their insightful comments that have greatly improved the final version of this volume. As with the previous three editions, major thanks also go to our proofreader and language editor Jonathan Harrow who thoroughly edited each and every contribution to this volume. We were also fortunate enough to have great student collaborators such as Anna Kyriazi and Diana Roxana Galos who helped us at different stages of the volume preparation and the publishing process itself. We extend our appreciation to Edward Elgar Publishing for their valuable assistance in the *eduLIFE* book series. Finally, we would like to thank the European Research Council (ERC) for its financial support.

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